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Post-Nationalist Geographies: Rasta, Ragga, and Reinventing Africa

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Source: *African Arts*, Vol. 27, No. 4 (Autumn, 1994), pp. 80-84+96

Published by: [UCLA James S. Coleman African Studies Center](#)

Stable URL: <http://www.jstor.org/stable/3337324>

Accessed: 24/01/2011 08:46

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POST-NATIONALIST GEOGRAPHIES Rasta, Ragga, and Reinventing Africa

The whole world is Africa...

Black Uhuru

Hear me now raggamuffin: we run all
sounds, and we run the nation. So mek
we just control the borderline.

Anonymous Pirate DJ

Ring the alarm, another sound is dying...

Tenor Saw

Because "Africa" has been called upon to justify so many movements of liberation and exploitation, and because it has functioned not only as a physical reality in the making of Western culture but also as a central concept in the canons of institutional (and revolutionary) knowledge, it is hard to mark a clear space between the layers of discourse and desire, and any Africa which may lie beyond. It is in many ways very difficult to extricate what is said of Africa from what Africa says of itself. Perhaps it is impossible. But if indeed "Africa" spoke, how would it speak and what would it say? What "itself" would it express, and could the sound of that voice be understood by ears still ringing with myth?

After all, a native sound connotes a system of native knowledge, and as Paul Gilroy has so well argued, national and cultural belonging—especially within the various populations of the black diaspora—cannot be fully understood in the realm of literacy and print media. Native knowledge cannot be accurately traced or located in the writings of the literate few. Instead it is articulated in and disseminated by what I call the sound/culture nexus: that discursive space where Africa ceaselessly extends and invents itself in an epistemological matrix coded not in words but in sound. Why sound? Because the discourse in sound is separate from those of the literary, of the *logos*; it is a space independent of the centered semantic structures of science, freed from the objective bias of literacy. It is necessarily the space of oral knowledge, the space of both magic and postmodern technology. Indeed, for this generation within a black diaspora, sound is closer to culture than "race" ever was.

For me, Africa speaks in those shadowy historical moments which go unrecorded, those moments of reflection when diaspora asks the question asked by Harlem poet Countee Cullen in 1925: "What is Africa to me?" But in these moments, the language is opaque, as with all oracular dispensations, and the events which mark them often very threatening. Take for example the stoning of Bunny Wailer. On the level of popular knowledge—as opposed to the towers of "cri-

tique"—the stoning of this semilegendary Rastafarian singer, the last living member of the original Wailers (Bob Marley and Peter Tosh both dying in the 1980s), signifies a crucial moment in diaspora. For you see, Wailer was more than just a singer: he was perhaps the last living symbol of black revolutionary desire from his generation. And his was a generation that helped thrust a mythic "Africa" to the forefront of black popular culture in the West Indies and, via reggae music and Rastafarianism, the world.

His being stoned in Jamaica by this new generation, the raggamuffin generation, signifies that something has radically changed in certain suburbs of the city I call diaspora. Certainly Africa constantly changes, but the meanings of Africa change too; they change and are adapted to fit the local notions of black identity and cultural survival. In this case the "Africa" central to a Rastafarian Pan-Africanism has been symbolically dislodged. The generation which celebrated Marcus Garvey as a prophet and Africa as "Zion" has been assaulted by the children birthed by it. This is because new economic and cultural conditions require new gods and symbols; old ones stagnate or become malevolent and repressive. In short, what we have in the raggamuffin/dancehall! (sub)cultural movement is a very harsh popular critique of what Africa means to us at this moment in a post-/neo-/omni-colonial world.

Emerging out of the Seaga-Thatcher-Reagan triumvirate in the 1980s and fueled by a booming international cocaine trade, ragga stepped boldly onto the diasporan stage as first an overturning of that Rastafarian mythos which celebrated a universalized notion of black racial and cultural identity; an essentialized vision of diaspora which exercised a sort of oppressive control over Jamaican cultural production. In its most sincere moments Rasta fetishized black cultural origins, rooting them in a fixed source of "ancientness" called, according to the Old Testament, "Ethiopia." And as the Rastafarian influence in reggae music grew and came to dominate in the 1970s, this obsession became crucially linked to the driving bass and drums of reggae "riddim." The music and its ideology, then, became so fastened to "roots" and ethnic/cultural authenticity that many felt challenged to speak to the raw present of Jamaican ghetto life—that which reggae had once directly addressed. Specificity was lost because of the obsession with global "Pan-African" discourses, racial metaphors, and religio-political allegories. And the ideology of "roots" did not offer a framework within which to contend with the changing environment of music, multinational capitalism, and global communications technology.

The raggamuffin generation then positioned itself as a serious challenge to any attempt to narrate diaspora based on similarities of oppression or pigment. Certainly Pan-Africanism has been criticized in the past for some of its racial essentialism, but to criticize the logic of essentialism is not in any way to halt its currency on the street. With the ston-

ing of Bunny Wailer, the much maligned raggamuffin sound/subculture has announced itself as the latest in a long line of exiles to ask Cullen's question and to violently reassess their position within the vagaries of black cultural history. For this generation, the slippages made between race and culture by their forbears have become the space in which new notions of belonging and becoming are asserted.

Where the Rastafarian "Africa" was a cultural commodity available to all those with black skin, one that could be traded across and beyond the Atlantic by Garvey's "Black Star Line" of ships or could be invented in sound by the open metonymic spaces of heavy dub echoes, the signifiers of ragga/dancehall ground themselves firmly in a "blackness" produced out of a specific cultural history. For the Rastafari brethren, "Zion," the promised land of Ethiopia, was both pre-colonial utopia and the imminent future of black people who were destined to survive the time span of Babylonian hegemony. With ragga, however, the abstraction of Ethiopia/Africa in what I have elsewhere called the "Discourse of Dread" gives way to Rasta, Tivoli Gardens, and Jungle, particular "Yard" (Jamaican) realities which do not function as global signifiers of black exile because they are so rooted in the urban myths of Jamaica's postcolonial history. And these signifiers and symbols quite clearly belong to "Yardies" who spend much time carefully "controlling the borderline" which separates one blackness, one idiosyncratic cultural experience, from another.

Rasta-reggae too had moments of specificity in its narratives—for example "Trenchtown" as mythic space, or "Dungle"—but they were always linked directly to some global narrative of black oppression. With raggamuffin sound, which currently dominates the ideologies of Afro-Caribbean youth and black Third World pop/ghetto culture, one is challenged to find references to the mythic signifier of black identity that is Africa. And most important, there is no longing for it. As a matter of fact, the few references in dancehall music to that distant memory of a continent are usually half-hearted attempts to criticize and condemn the present by evoking the moral authority of some always fictitious golden age. The sentiments of raggamuffin music and culture are very different from the nostalgia and longing for "elsewhere" that characterizes much of the kind of reggae and cultural production that comes out of Bob Marley's generation. The "Waiting in Vain," "Back to Africa," "Rasta Waan Go Home" exile narratives have given way to cultural expressions from those who see the new battles as immediate and local—through gun-sights and across dirty inner-city streets. From an aesthetics of exile and absence to an aesthetics of raw, materialistic presence.

Instead of dwelling psychically "elsewhere," the narratives of dancehall feature an exploration and celebration of the microrealities, the obsessive minutiae of Jamaican urban

life which holds little meaning for all outsiders. They also investigate the noir-ish street-level intricacies of a postcolonial underclass navigating a global network of immigrant communities. Outsiders to the culture of ragga (Jamaican and non-Jamaican) tend to find these narratives rude, crude, scatological, and "slack." This, however, is what DJs (read MCs, or rappers) describe as "strictly reality." Everything from local politics and crime to ghetto morality, from graphic depictions of murder to very explicit and pornographic details of the bedroom, gets put to rapid-fire boom-beats and is broadcast throughout the global community of Yardies. Lyrics, which in most cases are community property, belonging only to the moment of expression, range from the sublimely terrifying to the incredibly stupid.

Take for example the latest masterpiece in the "gun talk" genre, that subcategory of ragga chats which are devoted exclusively to the celebration of guns and the street credibility and power derived from them: "Shine and Criss" by the massive Shabba Ranks. Some of these tunes are explicitly metaphorical, celebrating the fierce competitions within sound culture; but these metaphors get strained due to that proximity between life and art, that closeness between a metaphorical "Sound-boy Killing" and, in the words of Terror Fabulous, "Literally Killing." I quote this track at length, not because it is definitive but because it is the latest and the most self-conscious of the genre. It is also a major hit:

Oil up all a the gun dem, keep them
shine and criss
A copper shot, you fe carry inna you
gun,
mek a bwoy turn purple any time him
get it, Lawd...
Me say the A.K. whe you bury,
me a beg you dig it up,
here is a bottle of pepsi to cut off the
rust
Finger pon the trigger, machine ready
fe bus,
Boy fe lay down like the gun me dig
up
If me cock it inna your nose, you haffe
sniff it up
If me push it inna your mouth, hold
your breath and no cough,
and no mek me see your teeth like a
laugh you want laugh:
the gun inna me hand a no looking
glass...
I don't trust no shadow when me
come after dark
Me kill first and a me last pop off
Tell them say that gunshot do all of
the talk...

The opening sample ("Original Gangster") is of course the ultimate statement of ghetto-political authenticity in Afro-American "gangsta rap." And this is where the potential in a hip hop/ragga cross-cultural discourse was first articulated on the street level. But what Shabba does in "Shine and Criss" is offer a view into the mind of a Yardie whose world is one of extreme violence, a world that has no

time for what Bajan writer George Lamming called "The Pleasures of Exile." Guns are a sign of entirely different assumptions about cultural positioning; or as Mad Cobra has said in his massive "Shot No Talk": "Fe me gun-shot/don't hold no argument." Some of these tracks are so vivid and violent that they are merely long, wrenching descriptions of slow torture and boasts about the most brutal ways to kill—not only one's enemy, but his family and friends (and one ridiculous line which pops up every now and then involves the murder of the family cat!). Indeed, some tunes are merely lists of the dead ("Roll Call" by Tenor Saw, or Super Cat's "Nuff Man A Dead") and celebrations of one's own homicidal history. As for the incredible stupidity—especially as it relates to sexual "slackness"—more on this later.

For those within this floating cultural context, Africa is less important—in fact it often gets in the way of—contemporary Third World ghetto life. As a British rudie once said to me, "Africa nah go mek me bullet-proof!"² More important, though, raggamuffin and dancehall narratives map out a sprawling Third World urban geography which stretches from the gun-loud poverty of Kingston to the bass-heavy housing estates of South London and over to that place that Raymond Williams located as the center of modernist exile—New York City. This is a discourse that is obsessively local, but well aware of the global network of Afro-Caribbean migration and the discontinuous histories of black diaspora. Inside the dense sound-sculpting of ragga mixology, the references begin and return to Yard, but in between the signifiers travel through the Jamaican communities in England ("London Massive, Brixton Crew"), New York ("Brooklyn Massive, Flatbush Posse"), and Canada ("Nuff Respect Toronto Massive!"). This is the matrix of dancehall music and culture: creating a new sense of national belonging beyond the boundaries constructed by politics and geography. Community is narrated there in that very tense space between the local and the global: the space they call "the borderline."

Although Seaga's Jamaica, Thatcher's England, and Reagan's America gave ragga the kind of painful birth necessary for their mythic function, they really were always there. They were overshadowed by the spectacle of Rasta and its pious moralisms, but they were there nonetheless, stalking Jamaica's neocolonial streets and consuming American cowboy and gangster films as well as the Old Testament and Pentecostalism. They existed within Rasta from the moment it defined itself as an urban phenomenon and as a place for those suppressed by the hierarchical and color-stratified social structure of Jamaica. During the sixties, before the hegemony of Rasta in the consciousness of ghetto sound, the earliest manifestation of the ragga can be located in the rude-boy phenomenon which swept the tiny island. The rudies, like today's "gangbangers" in America, were young males who had little access to education and were victims of the incredible unem-

ployment endemic to Third World urban centers. Their political consciousness was as developed as the Rastafari, but where the Rasta solution was one which often refused to engage directly with the harsh realities of ghetto and Third World life and frequently got lost in cloudy moments of rhetoric and myth ("roots and culture"), the rudies clung fiercely to "reality"—that trope central to today's ragga/dancehall culture. They terrorized the island, modeling themselves after their heroes from American films and glorying in their outlaw status. They killed, robbed, and looted, celebrating their very stylish nihilism. And ska and reggae—especially DJ-reggae,³ the beginning of rap/hip hop—were their musics.

Today the dreadlocks vision has been superseded—at least in the realm of sound and culture—by the rudie vision. The crucial differences between them can be seen quite vividly in their relationship to Babylon. Where in Rasta and other forms of popular Negritude there has always been some degree of nostalgia for a precolonial/preindustrial/precapitalist Africa, raggamuffin culture is very forward looking and capitalist oriented—as are most black people, despite the fantasies of many self-appointed nationalist leaders. These rudies focus their gaze, instead, on America, absorbing commodity culture from the fringes of the global marketplace, responding to it positively. This means that in the context of a Third World ghetto where there are more guns per capita than anywhere else in the world, where legitimate employment is often a fantasy, where the drug trade and music provide the only available options for success, these young men find affirmation in the various messages that radiate out from America, an America that is not the "center" but rather an imagined source of transmission. Messages like *The Godfather* get picked up and translated into island style. For example, one of the titles of utmost dancehall respect is "don."

The raggamuffin pantheon is full of DJs with names like Clint Eastwood, Johnny Ringo, Al Capone, Josey Wales, and Dillinger; and today's dons boast names like Bounty Killer, Shabba Ranks (named after a famous Jamaican gunman), and John Wayne. Also, the Jamaican underworld has always been full of characters who inscribed themselves into ghetto myth by renaming themselves in much the same way. Male identity in this context is a necessary pastiche, and the allegorical representations of America's dreams of itself become rewritten with a pen soaked in the blood of colonialism, slavery, and black ghetto style. The gunfighter/outlaw image has always been there in reggae; it is now, however, without overt references to the Western world as the "Sheriff," as in Bob Marley and the Wailers' classic "I Shot the Sheriff." For the ragga, this metaphor is no longer apt, for now they shoot each other in a lawless postcolonial terrain. Indeed, Ninjaman has described Jamaica as a "Cowboy Town."

These names—and the notion of crime as political/cultural resistance that they signify—were there during Rasta's moment, but

where the more Afrocentric embraced the Marley vision, the ghetto youth, the “bad-bwoys,” were smuggling in specialized weaponry like M16s, Glockes, and Bushmasters, killing each other and following their favorite sound systems⁴ around the island. And, of course, the cocaine and marijuana trade was booming. In fact, it was booming in such a way that in the 1980s a few of the more enterprising Yardies invested some of this money which came to the ghetto in—believe it or not—state-of-the-art digital computer technology. Thus began what Jah Fish (Murray Elias), an avid follower of Jamaican music, has called the “the modern era”⁵ of Afro-Caribbean sound and culture.

This, then, should help describe the ragga-muffin sound, what Dick Hebdige has called “an ultra-modern maisonette where all the surfaces are clean and shiny”⁶: a highly produced digital and floppy-disc-driven sound from a country which, ironically, has no significant computer technology to speak of. The ragga youth are immersed in this technology, fascinated with it in much the same way that early reggae mixers and producers were with multitrack technology. For them this technology and the highly experimental rhythms that they produce in it—as much akin to German and Eastern European avant-garde synthesizer music as to West African percussion and calypso—allow them to play with the signifiers and symbols of cultural history in the ontological space of sound. It also plugs them into an information network spread across the Atlantic, one focussed on the potential for cultural and economic exchange in the New World instead of a fixation with their roots in the Old. This is all summed up, I think, in the words of the truly large Cutty Ranks:

Me raggamuffin and me international,
to kill a DJ me don't partial,
right yah now, Jah man, me got me
credential,
and when me come a dance-hall man
me well official...
Me got the stopper,
to every DJ them have fe talk to me
proper,
say galang Cutty Rankin', gwaan go
kill them with the culture...
London, Paris and even California,
down a Japan or me gone down a
Africa
down a New Zealand or even inna
Canada,
yes, Cutty Rankin' a go kill you with
the lingua...

Let me provide a practical example of how this specific network within diaspora operates. The legendary team of Steely and Cleevie in Jamaica, or maybe Bobby Digital in Kingston, may send a floppy disc with the basic rhythm track to Daddy Freddy, who is in London with the up-and-coming production team of Mafia or Fluxy (or maybe Fashion, today's dominant U.K. sound). This track may feature the latest craze in dancehall rhythms—sampled Indian tablas mixed with Jamaican mento⁷ patterns from the 1950s.

After a brief vocal session, that same information could go to Massive B in the Bronx for hip hop beats or to Sting International in Brooklyn where R & B touches are added. Again, all of this is by modem or by floppy disc. Within a few days this mix is booming down the fences at the weekly “sound-clash” between Metromedia Hi Fi and the mighty Stone Love Sound System somewhere in a crowded field in West Kingston. Or in a community center in Brixton. An “authentic” Jamaican product! And this trade goes both ways, circulating throughout diaspora. (Even in Lagos, Nigeria, I have sat listening to Igbo rude-boys and Yoruba dreads rap in Jamaican Patwah about the virtues of Eddy Murphy!)

Here we can witness an attempt to connect the various points of black/Afro-Caribbean disembarkation into one transnational, commodity-based space. One postnationalist city of blackness—but with many, many suburbs. Maybe this is the only Zion possible: a place where the subversion and redefinition of First World technology and the loosening bands of racial/nationalist ideologies allow dancehall to create a new “Africa” within the postmodern networks of multinational capital; a virtual “black” community informed by the very arbitrariness of the racial signifier itself. And, like the Rastafari before them, they use sound to invent this space of black belonging. Sound which conveys cultural and historical meanings encoded in beats, grooves, and samples: digitalized culture production.

Tragically, violence and the drug trade follow this same route—these young men and women die in diaspora as quickly and as often as they enter into it. The bullets and gunshot sounds central to dancehall music, and the lyrical gun-fetishizations of the DJs, are not simply rhetorical figures; they reflect a certain reality. And the obsession with space, with controlling borders, is such that on the micropolitical level it leads to some of the fiercest territorial and aesthetic disputes in the world. Not only has reggae and dancehall been known for their deep intimacy with crime, but the very rituals of sound-system culture celebrate a certain ruthless parochiality. Sound-clashes often end in violence, with DJs and posses killing each other over lyrics, money, and volume disputes. And the lyrics of many ragga-chats are about the celebration of one's belonging to and willingness to kill and die for one's sound. Also, one of the most heartfelt ways of showing appreciation for the selector (he who controls the psycho-acoustic space of the dancehall and spins the records) is by firing real guns into the floor or off into the Jamaican night sky. These days applause has been replaced in sound sessions by the verbal chants of “Bo! Bo! Bo!” or “Booyaka”—imitation gunfire. Here, borders are patrolled because there is ever the fear of having some other sound encroach upon yours.

But it is in language that the cultural barriers between blacknesses are more clearly visible. There have always been fast talkers in various West Indian musics, and the vernacular has been long accepted as the medium of truly popular discourses throughout the

Caribbean. Rasta also featured its own language, one subtly independent of the Jamaican vernacular. Some called it “lyaric” and thought of it as the first step to complete semantic freedom from the “politricks” of neocolonial structures of power. The ragga strategy, however, is not to escape the language, but to use it to stress their specific “Yard-ness.” They so stress their Jamaican Patwah, by exaggerating, stretching, and speeding it up (almost to and sometimes beyond the point of parody), that it is incomprehensible and intimidating to those on the outside. This language is consciously as fast as the ragga beats, as garish as their style, replete with in-jokes, neologisms, specific island/cultural references, and full of more assertions concerning class and gender than racial authenticity.

Indeed, where Rasta and various Black Nationalisms and Negritudes tended to segregate women into a phallogentric ghetto—voices, identities, and bodies covered in some kind of revolutionary propriety—the ragga moment is one which is dominated by explicit representations of the sexuality of black women. In addition to urban tales of survival, machismo, and violent retributions, the body of the black woman is at the center of ragga cultural discourse.⁸ Not as metaphoric “Mama Africa,” to quote Peter Tosh (or any of the poets of French Negritude), but as a threatening physical and economic presence. An aggressive and predatory figure to be guarded against in some cases, and catered to in others. This is important because in Rasta, women were a conspicuous absence in the rhetoric and in the rituals of culture. And except for women like the I-Threes, who sang back-up for Bob Marley and the Wailers, they were absent in the iconography. But not only do women function in the symbolic order of raggamuffin sound, they are very present in the culture itself. They consume more records than the men do, and they control the dance floor. Most DJs today—acknowledging the market—orient their lyrics toward these women. From a Western liberal-feminist perspective these lyrics, because they are boldly heterosexual and disdainful of bourgeois sentimentality, seem very sexist and objectifying of women. However, down there in the mire of postcolonial reality, where power is a rare but prized commodity, these women find both affirmation and power in the fear that their sexuality creates in the men. It allows them the freedom and security to navigate in and around a world of brutality, violence, and economic privation.

And because this aesthetic is one of raw materialistic presence, where the pressures of history succumb to the intensity of the moment, the obsession with the body of woman—admiring it, celebrating it, possessing it, controlling it or fearing its power—seems to pick up where the obsession with “Africa” left off. But here it is without the gendered romance of Negritude or Rasta-nationalism. Here racial romance has given way to something much less pastoral and much more vicious. With titles ranging from “Want a Virgin” and “Love Punaany”⁹ Bad”

("Punaany it so nice/Punaany it so slick/Come put your lips on a 12 inch d**k") and with lyrics ranging from horrific celebrations of male sexual aggression ("Me ram it and a jam it 'till the gal start to vomit") to lyrics mapping out the rituals and morality of ghetto relationships, this music articulates a world completely devoid of sentimentality and intimacy—a world where one is, in the words of Don Gorgon Ninjaman, "Married to Mi Gun." And many of the women who pick up the mike today and attempt to "ram up session" demand not equality but that their dons "ride and provide."

It is also important to note that the particular uses of language in raggamuffin sound culture tend, as was my point earlier, to consciously separate them from blacks met in New York, Miami, or London. They use language, as many Afro-Caribbean immigrants have, to signify and create cultural difference within the nationalist monolith of "blackness." Despite the fact that Pan-Africanism is in many ways an invention of the West Indies, the specific racial dynamics of the ideology require that culture often be elided for the sake of "race," that the specifics of one African experience be lost in the Atlantic for the sake of an ahistorical, transcendental "ness." This has created certain hostilities which conveniently escape the annals of black historiography—nationalist or otherwise—because they would strip "racial" affiliations of their often merely rhetorical power. The longstanding tensions between Jamaicans and black Americans in Harlem—between Garvey and the Harlem "Niggerati," for example—attest to this crisis of affiliation. This use of language and culture, this particular intraracial silence, functions as a reaction to the shock of seeing each other; to be ambivalently placed between an assumption of racial affinity and the differential truths of black history. Once again, the "borderline" that figures so prominently in raggamuffin sound.

None of this, however, is to suggest that there is no ground of commonality—as with history, racism, slavery, exploitation. Not even the most nihilistic "dogheart" DJs would assert such a thing. By now it is clear to me that diaspora is a memory bank of signifiers and symbols of black authenticity constructed over the last century or so and is moored by an assumed racial/cultural commonality. Without this assumption there really is nothing to talk about; there really is no "we" or, in some cases, "them." But due to it, the assumption, there is now more exchange between and among blacknesses than there has been since the slave trade! The ragga response, however, is not to accept themselves as passive victims in an overwhelming Babylonian structure, not to represent themselves as "wailers," as victims of history belonging to a helplessly innocent race. This can be seen in the incredible boasting and self-assertions that are typical of dancehall and the "fearless" rude-boys who "ride the riddim." Instead, they see themselves in many ways as being free within Babylon to destroy history and rebuild community—to, in T.S. Eliot's words, "murder and create."

Listening Guide

Considering that the ragga/dancehall industry is a singles industry releasing over 200 new singles a week, and considering that its infrastructure is still very close to the West Indian grassroots and sound-system subculture, it is at this point very difficult to obtain those specific tracks which characterize the form at any given moment. Most fresh singles reach certain American record stores in a limited quantity and are snatched up by selectors, DJs, and those "in the know." And the albums which are widely available tend to feature a DJ's two or three hits and acres of bad material. However, acknowledging this scenario, many independent and major labels have made available dozens of compilations featuring the major hits of the last few months. (These, of course, are notoriously late since there is such a high turnover rate of hits and artists and since things get laughably old in a matter of days.)

I would suggest any of the following compilations since they all fairly well give an idea of what I have been trying to describe:

Bam Bam It's Murder. Features the major hits "Murder She Wrote" by Chaka Demus and Pliers and "Them A Bleach" by Nardo Ranks. This is very available and highly recommended.

Booyaka: The Ultimate Dancehall Collection. Available on Big Beat records featuring many of 1993's best, like Terry Ganzie's "Welcome the Outlaw," Baby Wayne's "Can't Live So," Cutty Ranks' "Open Up," and a reissue of Sister Nancy's haunting "Bam Bam."

Dancehall Stylee: The Best of Reggae Dancehall Music, vols. 1–4. Especially vol. 2 which features Shabba Ranks' "Wicked in Bed," Ninjaman's "Murder Dem," Little Lenny's "Gun in A Baggy," and the very important "Ring the Alarm" by the late great Tenor Saw.

Just Ragga, vols. 1–6 on Charm Records, London. Very hardcore and "authentic."

Strictly the Best, vols. 1–13. These tend to balance well the more pop-oriented sounds with the vicious, hardcore slam-jams. Number 3 features Pinchers' huge hit "Bandelero" and Ninjaman's "Test the High Power," which is the most well-articulated description of being at a sound session that I have ever heard.

Also, Roof International/Cosmic Force Records have put out a series of dancehall compilations that are well respected in the DJ community. Still, any compilations that you find—especially those that feature bhangra/bangara rhythms or very experimental rhythms that sound nothing like reggae—should serve to make my points clearer.

As for major label albums, I will suggest only a few:

As Raw As Ever and *X-tra Naked* by Shabba Ranks. These two American albums have won Ranks two Grammy awards and an Afro-American audience that even Bob Marley couldn't get. The latter features the Yard hit "Ting-a-Ling" and a number of American R & B crossover smashes.

From Mi Heart by Cutty Ranks. Includes a handful of very good tunes. But the classic is *The Stopper*, featuring the hit title track.

Don Dadda by SuperCat. This album is highly recommended. Features the hit single "Ghetto Red Hot" as well as the classic "Nuff Man A Dead." If you can find the Massive B. hip hop remix of "Ghetto Red Hot" you will have found the most successful ragga/hip hop fusion single to date.

Raggamuffin Soldier by Daddy Freddy. Despite an incredibly bad debut solo album, this second full album by Daddy Freddy is very highly recommended. In my humble opinion, it ranks as the best and most diverse full ragga album available. Daddy Freddy chats on hard Yard riddims as well as gangsta-hip hop beats and jazz-funk tracks. It's on Chrysalis records so it is widely available. Definitely check this one out.

Anything you can find from Ninjaman "the Don Gorgon," "the People's DJ," will blow your mind—if you can get through his dense Patwah and virtuoso lyrical style. He has ruled in Jamaica for years, and his early albums (pre-1993) feature some incredible verbal, rhythmic, and narrative adventures. His latest is *Nobody's Business But My Own*, featuring "Married to Mi Gun," "Mi Belly Move," and "(The World) Between Her Legs."

Patra has recently been signed as the first major female DJ, and her album on Epic, *Queen of the Pack*, features tracks that are definitely "the boom."

And no list would be complete without mentioning 1993's DJ kid sensation, Buju Banton. Nineteen years old, gruff, and truly wicked, his American debut is the aptly titled *Voice of Jamaica*.

This list, of course, is not definitive and is based on my own collection and my experience as a selector/DJ with the sound system Ebony Tower International.

Unfortunately this equation tilts too often to the "murder" side—as in two recent ragga hits, "Murder She Wrote" and "Murder Dem!"—due to the intense competition, violence, and wanton bloodshed central to the crack/cocaine trade, the Jamaican record industry, and the vagaries of ghetto living and grassroots capitalism. Nevertheless, the ragga are here, there, everywhere, stalking the ever-extending streets of diaspora with a lethal and dangerous style. Imagining freedom within the virtual networks of dissemination and consumption, they circulate, never achieving a fixed moment of landfall. They follow their sound and their sound follows them, defiantly asserting noisy difference in the center of that dream space called diaspora.

Now big up all massive, London massive, New York bad bwoy, Toronto massive—all crew! Rude bwoys a foreign and rudie's a Yard big up cause you know say all a we a Jamaicans. And we know that no dibby-dibby sound-bwoy can cross the border, cause if him test it, him a go dead—pure gun-shot inna him head! So come now, my selector, come with a next riddim cause we no skin teeth and fret fe the sound-bwoy dem. Come, raggamuffin, enter inside this ya sound...

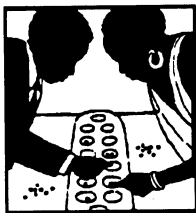
Skyjuice, selector from Metromedia Sound System

Louis Chude-Sokei
Notes, page 96

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CHUDE-SOKEI: Notes, from page 84

A slightly different version of this paper was presented at a conference titled "Art, Aesthetics and Politics in Africa and the Caribbean," which was held at the University of California, San Diego, in 1994. It is being published with the proceeds of that conference.

1. Dancehall and raggamuffin are terms used often interchangeably to describe the new computer-driven musics coming primarily out of Jamaica in the wake of traditional reggae music and culture. Although some of it sounds merely like hi-tech reggae, most of it sounds nothing like its predecessor at all. These terms also describe the musics' attendant cultural superstructure—attitudes, styles, language, and socio-political orientation. Originally the dancehall was (and still is) the physical space—an open field, a rented auditorium—in which sound systems strung up and held public dances. It is in this context that the discourses of Jamaica's urban, working-class culture worked themselves out in sound and expressive culture.

But I prefer to think of a difference between ragga and dancehall in much the way many see the distinction between hip hop and rap: the latter is more commercial, dealing with the music that has gotten mass attention and become streamlined for popular tastes; whereas the former also connotes a culture and is more disdainful of popular acceptance.

2. Heartical respect to Welton Irie and all Ladbroke Grove massive.
3. DJ-reggae is the form of reggae that dancehall and hip hop descend from almost exclusively. It features the use of prerecorded instrumental tracks ("versions") or strategic breaks in a tune as spaces for the DJ to improvise new, spoken lyrics. This form of reggae has only recently gotten the international attention it deserves, but has ruled in Jamaica even from when Bob Marley was the global "Reggae Ambassador."

4. Sound systems are one of the black diaspora's most enduring and frequently unacknowledged cultural institutions. Although variations can be found throughout diaspora history, the form they have today can be traced back to those mobile discotheques in Jamaica during the late '50s/early '60s which would set up in empty fields around the more economically depressed areas in Kingston. Cane cutters who were taken to Miami for brief stints of migrant labor would return to Jamaica with the latest R & B records and play them

on homemade stereos customized to produce a level of volume that was nothing less than insane. Especially the bass frequencies. These rapidly became the only social and cultural space that catered to the ghetto dwellers. Shunning popular media—neocolonial radio and television which expressed the views of a culturally insecure elite—these systems became the primary space of cultural discourse in the vernacular. Indeed, it is this sort of discourse that reinvents Africa and celebrates Garvey where the national media evaded such issues; it is here that the fissures in the official narratives of race and nation were opened up for popular scrutiny, culminating in the development of ska, rock-steady, and then reggae and ragga.

With the migration of Jamaicans to London in the late '50s, sound systems became a space of exile where for a loud bass-thick moment, "home" could be invented there in the midst of Babylon. With the success of West Indian musics and style in England, the sound-system structure was picked up by various youth subcultures who reaccentuated it, eventually creating the digital sound cultures we see throughout Europe today. And the technical and musical innovations developed in ghetto studios because of the need to circumvent the limitations of poor equipment have become standard in state-of-the-art dance musics and production in the West.

In New York, this alternate media structure was central to the formation of hip hop music and the foundation of its attendant subculture.

5. S.H. Fernando, Jr., "Hip Hop Meets Reggae Inna Soundclash," *Dub Catcher: The Soul Voice of Jamaican Roots*, Winter 1993.

6. Dick Hebdige, *Cut 'N Mix: Culture, Identity and Caribbean Music* (Routledge, 1990), p. 151.

7. Mento was the earliest music fully acknowledged as indigenously Jamaican. In the late 1950s its mixture of African and Latin percussion was the foundation upon which subsequent musical forms were built. Oddly enough, after years of bass-dominated harmonies, mento has returned in Jamaican music via sampling technology which seems to inspire artists to dig into the past and reshuffle (remix) their roots.

8. A much better and more specific discussion of the sexual politics of dancehall can be found in Carolyn Cooper's "Erotic Play in the Dancehall," *Jamaica Journal* 22, 14.

9. "Punaany": crude slang term for the female genitalia. Usage very popular in ragga.

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